Of saintliness and sex: the aged protagonist in Shrilal Shukla's *Bisrāmpur kā sant* (1998)

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> But the most curious fact is that it is also only towards the close of life that a man really recognizes and understands his own true self, the aims and objects he has followed in life, more especially the kind of relation in which he has stood to other people and to the world. It will often happen that as a result of this knowledge, a man will have to assign himself a lower place than he formerly thought was his due.
> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Ages of Life*

> To those who have not within them the means of
> a virtuous and happy life, every age is a burden.
> Cicero, *De senectute*

Giving proof of much resilience and innovative force, the Hindi novel of the last decade has come up with a number of new themes and features, one of them being the discovery of the aged person as protagonist. Alka Saravgi's *Kali-kathā: vāyā bāipās* (1998), Shrilal Shukla's *Bisrāmpur kā sant* (1998), Nirmal Varma's *Antim araṇya* (2000) and Krishna Sobti's *Samay sargam* (2000) are among the more prominent examples of recent Hindi novels featuring an old man or woman in the role of central character. While their preoccupation with old age reflects a growing concern about the subject in Indian society, shared by social scientists and the general public,[1] these novels have opened up a new dimension in the psychologically informed character portrayal in modern Hindi literature. In their refusal to romanticize old age they offer complex and challenging images of ageing as both a social condition and a subjective experience. Shrilal Shukla's latest novel *Bisrāmpur kā sant* (The Saint of Bisrampur, hereafter: BS) represents a marked departure from the famed author's earlier writing. Shukla (b. 1925) is known to the Hindi reading public as a master of subtle irony and poignant social satire through his many prose writings, especially his famous novel *Rāg darbārī* (1968), a "modern classic" of contemporary Hindi literature (Snell 1998). BS starts off in the same vein with a pungent satire of the political establishment, a world well known to the author from his own career in the Indian Administrative Service. However, within the first chapter itself the narrative abruptly changes in tone, to introduce a more serious subject matter. In BS Shukla embarks on an—not entirely unproblematic—attempt to combine two themes into a single narrative: one is the personal history of the novel's aged protagonist who is no ordinary person but a retired state governor. Upon looking back on an outstanding career, this octogenarian also looks back on a private life marred by a conflicting sexuality and an overwhelming sense of guilt for having had a devastating influence on a young woman's life. The novel's other theme is the collective historical experience of the *bhūdān* or "land donation" movement initiated by Vinoba Bhave in the 1950's.[2] Bhave, in the manner of Indian saints, travelled throughout the country, ask-

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ing for gifts of land to be made to the landless and then urging that these donated lands be farmed collectively, in the form of farming co-operatives. The movement, though popular at the time and leaving a marked impression on the author's generation, had no significant long-term effect on the problem of land distribution in India. The novel extensively tells of its failure.

Although BS won the prestigious Birla Foundation Literary Award in 1999, it has not been well received by Indian critics who, denying the novel its complexity, generally read it as a failed literary attempt to recapture the bhudan-movement (e.g. Bhardvaj 1999; Mishra 2000). The present discussion of the novel suggests a different reading, by focusing on the figure of the protagonist who provides the integrating structural link in Shukla's dual concern with an individual life on the one hand and a collective historical experience on the other. It will view the novel as the narrative of an old person's painful confrontation with his past and present selves which in the course of narration leads to some kind of inner transformation. This approach has been adopted in the light of the suggestive quality of the last paragraph in the novel's opening scene. It metaphorically prefigures the protagonist's reluctant coming face to face with his true self: "... in the full-sized mirror on the wall a face appeared. He wanted to reject it, but had to accept that it was his own" (8).

The plot

On the eve of his retirement from the post of governor of a North Indian state, Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh receives the news of the death of Sundari, a woman he had met thirty years before when during the bhudan-movement she had come to his family's feudal estate as a young voluntary worker in the company of Vinoba Bhave. At that time Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh had made a gift of two villages to the bhudan-movement. Together with two co-workers Sundari had remained on the estate to help implement the new scheme. Since Sundari strongly reminded him of his "first and perhaps last love" Jayashri, a young married woman with whom he had maintained a brief and problematic liaison in his youth, he was irresistibly attracted to her. In an attempt to relive the past he projected his unfulfilled desires onto Sundari, drawing increasingly close to her. The situation culminated in a physical assault of sorts, which he instantly tried to cover up by a proposal of marriage. Sundari turned down the proposal and subsequently retired to the remote hamlet of Bisrampur where she devoted herself to the cause of the bhudan-movement and a life in social service.

Thirty years later, the news of Sundari's death has a profound impact on the now eighty-year old man: it not only propels him onto a painful mental journey into the past, but also physically draws him to the ashram in Bisrampur where Sundari worked. After his retirement as governor, Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh decides to settle in Bisrampur and take charge of the run-down ashram's affairs. In the course of his self-imposed exile he is not only confronted with the events of his own past, but also with the realities prevailing at Bisrampur, particularly the machinations of the goonda-landlord Maharaj Dube, who has taken control of the local co-operative farm, thereby depriving the farmers of their land. Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh fails to handle the conflict efficiently.

Humbled by ashram life and the experience of his own inadequacy he gradually turns into a more tolerant and agreeable human being. The narrative is brought to an unexpected and dramatic climax when one day Sushila, Sundari's erstwhile companion and confidante, turns up in Bisrampur. Being the only person to know what happened between Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh and Sundari in the past, she plays the devil's advocate by sending him an old letter written by Sundari. From it Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh, and with him the reader, learns that his only son Vivek had loved and wanted to marry Sundari. His own unfortunate "declaration" had come on the very day that Sundari was going to accept Vivek's proposal, forcing her to turn Vivek down. The shock of discovering that by his misconduct he supposedly ruined the lives of two young people has a devastating effect on the old man. Ridden by guilt he seeks liberation from a no longer meaningful existence and commits suicide.

Structure and point of view

The novel's eleven chapters are divided into small scenes, giving it an episodic and fragmented structure. Narration by way of flashbacks constantly shifts between the protagonist's present and his past, allowing for a gradual revelation of the problems informing his life and psyche. With this incessant shifting back and forth in time the past is shown to loom over the protagonist's present existence as a powerful, dominating force. Precise indications of time allow to identify him at three crucial stages of his life: as a young student having his first sexual experiences with Jayashri, as a mature man of fifty-one years fatally attracted to Sundari, and as an octogenarian trying to come to terms with his past and present situation. Covering a time span of about one year, the protagonist's present is a period of inner and outward transformation, which encompasses his retirement, sojourn in Bisrampur and finally his suicide. From a structural point of view BS is very much a conventional novel, with no pretensions at formal or linguistic experiment. The author's basic interest seems to centre on the conception of his protagonist, for the story, much in the manner of the nineteenth-century novel, essentially revolves around one central character and his moral conflict (Sinh 1998: 52). In accordance with the nineteenth-century model, Shukla has opted for a 'traditional' third-person narration featuring an omniscient narrator. If this point of view lends itself to a depiction of the bhudan-movement from various angles, it also, and far more significantly in the present context, allows the author to delve into his characters' minds, revealing their innermost feelings, reflections and conflicts. Focalization in BS basically switches between the omniscient narrator and the protagonist, who as internal focalizer is also a reflector, many of the events being seen through his consciousness.[3] Yet the narrative also provides a 'dissenting voice', that of the protagonist's son, an intellectual by the telling name of Vivek, "discernment, discrimination", who comes closest to being the author's mouthpiece in the novel. Shukla in BS shows a pronounced interest in human psychology and the complexity of human behaviour which he transforms into a narrative strategy of revelation, as reflected in both the time-structure of the novel and the portrayal of the protagonist.[4] On the thematic level, this strategy of revelation is of central importance to the novel's underlying concern with self-confrontation as a fundamental human experience of the last stage of life.

Exposing the protagonist

The conception of the protagonist in BS draws on a number of themes, one being the coexistence of two contrasting personae within the same character, i.e. a public and a private self. The opening sentence of the novel, though of an ironic nature, signals the basic paradox underlying the protagonist's existence: "While the Chief Minister of the State was waiting to meet His Excellency in the hall of audience of the governor's residence, His Excellency himself was in his bedroom having a dream" (7). The attributes characterizing "His Excellency", that is the 'public' Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh, descendant of a wealthy family of feudal landlords, High Court Judge, delegate to the United Nations, State Governor and shrewd administrator-politician, are by no means those of a pleasant person. He is depicted as a whimsical, short-tempered, stubborn and condescending old man who is ill-disposed and abusive towards his subordinates. Throughout the novel Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh is described by his awe-inspiring full name, an emblem of power and authority, which has a clear distancing function, making it hard for the reader to sympathize with the character. Command to Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh comes naturally. His authoritarian nature is effectively underlined by the description of his voice as "growling" (the term constantly used is *gurrāhaṭ*, "growl, snarl") and his choice idiom, i.e. the highbrow bureaucratic Hindi which he deliberately uses to impress. Hidden behind this imposing facade of power, to be gradually revealed to the reader, is the protagonist's private persona of a lonely and despondent old man who is tormented by an unresolved conflict. The resulting image is that of a complex, ambivalent character: strength and weakness, power and impotence, self-confidence and fear are some of the conflicting qualities characterizing the protagonist of BS who is conceived simultaneously as an embodiment of social success and an epitome of human frailty. The ambivalence underlying the novel's central character is reflected in the narrator's attitude toward him. Inasmuch as the 'official' Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh is conceived of as a representative of the exclusive 'caste' of Indian administrator-politicians, the narrator is prone to irony, frequently using the figure for a satirical depiction of the world of Indian politics and officialdom. By contrast, the interest that Shukla takes in the protagonist's private self is of a much more serious nature. If here, too, some underlying mockery can be detected, it is only sporadic and of a quite different quality. The introduction of some parodistic elements in the depiction of the private Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh serves to highlight the element of absurdity and the grotesque that informs his existence, rather than ridicule him. The most prominent of these elements is the Western-style toilet that he has installed in the Bisrampur ashram prior to his arrival. The narrator dwells at length on this alien object which in the backward and decrepit surroundings of Bisrampur is as much out of place as the sophisticated man himself, with his love of luxury and inherent fear of "contamination" by low caste people. A grotesque symbol pointing to the insincerity of his presence in the ashram, the toilet features prominently in the description of Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh's first desolate evening in Bisrampur. It becomes his sole refuge, if only temporarily, for a power-cut forces him to abandon it to a gloomy reality:

> While sitting in the bathroom he had thought that the toilet was alright. Now it seemed to him that apart from the toilet everything was wrong. It came to him like a shock: this wasn't his world, everything here was unintelligible. There was nothing here to which he could relate, nothing which he could call his own. (82)

As can be gathered from this passage, the narrator's basic intention is one of exposing the protagonist, in the sense of revealing the 'truth' about his feelings and hidden motivations. The novel in this context offers a scene of great symbolic significance, in which Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh is taking his bath on the roof top of his son's Delhi bungalow (an exposed position indeed!). In the old-fashioned feudal way he is bathed by two servants, one of whom when changing his master's loin-cloth accidentally lets it slip so that for a moment the old man stands stark naked in front of everybody's eyes. The moment is a terrifying one for Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh who feels that he has become *hameshā ke lie naṁge* (67) in the word's double sense of "forever naked" and "forever exposed". At the narrative level, the protagonist has to undergo a similar ordeal of public exposure: he is constantly disrobed by the omniscient narrator and stands naked before the reader's eyes. By focusing on the human being behind the facade, stripped of all the paraphernalia of power, the narrator directs the reader's gaze to what lies in the essence of the character: a lonely person confronted with old age. It is the subjective experience of ageing, in its classic threefold dimension, social, biological and psychological, that inextricably links the protagonist's public and private personae, to form another central theme in the novel.

The biological dimension: decay and death

The protagonist's confrontation with the self is at one level one with the biological burden of old age; it is a confrontation with physical decay and impending death. Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh is introduced to the reader in the most unheroic pose of an old man lying in bed, the narrator shedding a pitiless look at his "slack and worn-out body" (*ḍhīlī-ḍhālī past kāyā*, 7). As already noted, Shukla in the opening scene of BS resorts to an important image in the literature on the aged, the look in the mirror. The protagonist's spontaneous wish to reject his mirror image is reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir's theory of "instant repulsion" to the ageing body, as discussed by Karen Woodward (1983) in a compelling essay on the ageing body and literary imagination.[5] Yet the ravages of time on the physical body are not one of Shukla's primary concerns. The mirror motive takes on a different connotation in BS, functioning as a symbol in the novel's fundamental theme of self-confrontation and self-delusion of which more will be said later.

The narrator of BS can hardly be said to indulge in the description of the physical traits of the old man (the novel provides merely one description of his ageing face, in its opening pages). Nor does the protagonist, whose life "had been spent in the company of full-sized mirrors" (129), principally shun the look in the mirror. Since he is used to looking much younger than he actually is, the mirror holds no terror even for the octogenarian. An object initially missed during the first days at Bisrampur, the mirror gradually loses its significance, indicating a slow relinquishing of vanity in the protagonist.

Equally, the protagonist's attitude towards the onset of age-related physical infirmity changes in the course of his stay at the ashram. Earlier on, Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh would stubbornly resist the biological implications of old age. A heart-attack coming at the most inopportune moment, when his future career was at stake, was vigorously brushed aside: "Viewing with contempt the doctors' advice that he needed complete rest, he could not bring his mind to accept that he had become very old, and was still coveting new responsibilities" (72). Later, while at Bisrampur, the protagonist feels no longer under pressure to conceal the signs of old age and more readily submits to the lifestyle of an elderly person. He is frequently depicted as resting on his bed, taking naps, walking around with a stick. Yet admitting to physical ailments remains problematic, for it is in opposition to his new self-perception:

> At one time, during his days as governor, even on catching only a mild fever, he would hope that the whole state would be worried about him. Having spent a few months here in the ashram, he felt irritated if someone showed concern about his health. He had now come to regard himself as an old ascetic who, viewing the body as a means of service to the community, always kept it functioning. Hearing a reference to some ailment in his body seemed as if he was being criticised for being unsuccessful. (189)

The overall impression emerging from the physical portrayal that Shukla draws of his protagonist is one of fatigue rather than decrepitude. The weariness of the body ultimately signifies the weariness of his mind and soul. Inextricably linked to the experience of physical ageing is the notion of impending death, evoking the classic theme of time as an eroder of the self. Hence the "undefined despondency" (114) that the old man experiences while at Bisrampur. It is rooted in the loneliness of a person who has witnessed all his companions in life die before him and is now left alone to await his own death. Sundari's death, in particular, reminds Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh of his own mortality and what little time he has left to repent. In this context, the faculty of memory, if elusive, only enhances the tedium that life has become for him: "But, he thought dejectedly, this very long life is the bone of contention. Each new day ends with new experiences rendering the unwelcome burden of memory ever heavier. Why did he who made memories not provide for a garbage bin to chuck this burden in?" (162). It is only when life seems no longer worth living that concrete fears of physical decay and infirmity appear, supporting his resolution to commit suicide.

The social dimension: resisting obsoleteness

Shukla in BS deliberately undermines cherished cultural notions of old age. Old age for his retiring protagonist is no longer the blissful state of public veneration commonly extolled in Indian lore. Rather, it signifies a loss of social status, ntailing a descent into public oblivion. After an outstanding public career as High Court Judge and governor of two Indian states, Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the fact that his services are no longer sought. With slightly mocking undertones the narrator describes the protagonist's inflated sense of ego and belief in his indispensability,

nurtured by years in power. At eighty-one he entertains "a young man's ambitions" (72) and dreams of nothing less than an ambassador's post in Washington. When the post is given to another elderly official he does not hesitate to denigrate his successful adversary as "senile" (66). Given his refusal to withdraw voluntarily from public life Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh has to learn the laws of modern society the hard way: he meets the fate of many an old politician and is disposed of. The protagonist's fall from official grace is condensed in a scene depicting his last meeting with the Prime Minister, during which he cuts a pathetic figure. His intellectual faculties undiminished, he is painfully aware of the fact that his political instinct has failed him and watches himself commit a series of strategic blunders. Even his flirtation with old age, a proven strategy, is shown to turn against him:

> Since the last twenty years or so his sycophants had started to make use of his age to keep him happy. They would always remind him of the fact that he looked at least fifteen years younger than he was. Then, when sometimes he needed to hear the praises of his so-called eternal youth, he made sure to mention his age under some pretext or other. And the audience in response did not fail to say, Sir, this is impossible, you can't be that old! Having rehearsed this play many times, to mention his age again and again had become something of a habit with him.
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> Today, having given a demonstration of this habit in front of the Prime Minister, he felt that he had made another mistake.
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> The days were gone when old age was regarded as a proof of great insight and experience in a political leader. At least it used to be connected with sustained devotion and sacrifice. In unintentionally mentioning his age he could not hope that the Prime Minister would roll his eyes in amazement and duly praise him for looking like he were sixty, but in a corner of his mind he certainly entertained the hope that he be paid the extra respect coming with old age.
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> Now, as the words "eighty years" came from his mouth, he was suddenly reminded of something else. During the term-in-office of this same Prime Minister, all old politicians, apart from two or three wicked old men who were still of some use to him, had been dumped in the rubbish-bin of history, and the ones who were left were also on their way there. When mentioning that being in good health at the age of eighty was a sign of good fortune he had wanted to point out that he was as active as any average young man, and much more so than governor or ambassador so on and so forth, but his words had turned against him. It seemed to him that on hearing the reference to "eighty years" the Prime Minister had started thinking about rubbish and the rubbish-bin. (73f)

The passage gives way to a general comment on present-day Indian politics where a new generation of 'smart' and modern young men is said to have taken charge, rendering the protagonist's generation 'useless' or, at best, tolerated. It is with latent nostalgia that Shukla in BS pays homage to a dying generation of men who were inspired by Gandhian

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philosophy and devoted to the ideal of a just and democratic Indian society. The few remaining representatives of this era, as he lets his protagonist reflect, are either relegated to unimportant positions or exploited for the purpose of rhetoric and propaganda. While Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh is much too complex and controversial a character to fit the positive stereotype of a veteran freedom fighter, the novel offers images of three such 'saintly' figures—the historical Vinoba Bhave and the fictive characters of Raja Sahib, the protagonist's older brother, and Rao Sahib, another family member, whose imposing shadows loom large over his existence.

Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh may show remarkable resilience in the face of the bitter blow of having been discarded, but the narrator leaves no doubt that the character's unrelenting faith in his own usefulness is nothing more than a "stubborn hope" (86). Given his desire to escape obsoleteness, the old man's decision to spend the rest of his days in Bisrampur to do something "meaningful", is imbued with a fundamental irony, for the remote hamlet with its ashram and non-functioning co-operative farm is the very epitome of obsoleteness, a relict of the bhudan-movement of the 1950's, testifying to the movement's failure. In his description of the Bisrampur setting Shukla's satirical talent comes to the fore. What is left of the bhudan-movement are its "high ambitions and their burial-grounds, spread far and wide on both sides of the road" (30) and a co-operative farm which for the past thirty years has been "not a farm, but, at most, the intention of one", its lands being used as "a dung heap for government grants" (34). The place is run down, mismanaged, intrigue-ridden, the only functioning part is its children's hostel. To revive the place, the protagonist is warned, is like "flogging a dead horse" (35).

The sharpest critic of the bhudan-movement in the novel is the protagonist's son Vivek, an intellectual with pronounced leftist leanings. Vivek, professor of economics at Delhi University, who in the course of the narrative becomes Director of the Indian Institute of Economic Affairs, assesses the movement from an elitist viewpoint. His well-informed, intellectually detached approach exposes its lofty idealism, far removed from reality, and makes its adherents look naive. According to Vivek the bhudan-movement was nothing more than a "mirage" (*mrigmarīcikā*), an experiment which from the outset was bound to fail since it did not take into account basic realities of rural India and its agrarian system. Vivek is also the one to critically comment on his father's "burying himself in Bisrampur", judging it to be an angry reaction to the Prime Minister's indifference and ungratefulness. The decision strikes him as a carefully orchestrated pose: "This eminent man now being deprived of power wants to live in theatricality!" (79).

In covering up the disgrace of having been unceremoniously disposed of, Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh finds support in the traditional Hindu concept of *vānaprastha*, the third of the four stages of life, where a man gives up active social life to withdraw to the forest and turn inward to spiritual concerns. However, the age-old concept of vanaprastha is quickly demystified, since it is shown to work no longer for Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh. The feeling of uselessness (*vyarthatā*) continues to torment him and is only alleviated when he finds a concrete project in fighting the landlord Dube Maharaj, a local scoundrel who has taken control over the co-operative farm, depriving the peasants of their land. It is Dube's public threat to kill him which brings Kumvar

Jayantiprasad Sinh into alliance with the Bisrampur community, restoring him to central concepts of his life—social utility, authority, leadership— and giving him a new purpose in life: "...now the feeling of loneliness was coming to an end, it seemed as if by publicly insulting him, Dube Maharaj had set him free from within" (138).

Bisrampur for the protagonist is first and foremost a lesson in humility. No longer supported by the apparatus of power, he is unable to handle the conflict efficiently and help the peasants get their right. Instead he not only experiences fear, but also learns the bitter truth that many of his former achievements were due to the influence flowing from his position rather than his own mental capacities. The experience of his own inadequacy leaves him disconcerted, robbing him of his "unfailing confidence in himself" (*apne meṁ aṭūṭ vishvās*, 149); yet it also helps to transform him into a humbler human being.

The psychological dimension: sex, remorse, loneliness

To the protagonist of BS old age, instead of bringing serenity, is fraught with mental torment. Shukla takes a special interest in the theme of sexuality, placing it at the centre of his protagonist's inner conflict. The story of his emotional life is not one of love, but of sexual frustration, suppressed longing and guilt. The novel significantly opens with a dream scene, in which the octogenarian's erotic fantasies are shown to turn into a Freudian nightmare: the body of the woman in whose arms he lies turns into stone, his chest being stabbed by her stony breasts. The image is one of petrifaction, connoting coldness and lack of feeling, but also violence and hurt. While the intensity of the old man's sexual fantasies may be disturbing to the reader, the dream highlights sexuality as a conflicting, threatening force in the protagonist's psyche. In modern Indian society sexuality in old age is shrouded in a strong social taboo. As such it usually features in Hindi literature and cinema in its reproachable aspects of rape or of lecherous old men preying on young women.[6] Alternatively, it is ridiculed in the figure of the decrepit husband who is led on by his young wife. Shukla's portrait of his old protagonist defies such stereotyping. Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh is not simply a 'dirty old man'. If there are frequent allusions to the licentiousness of his desire, they, rather than censuring him, serve to depict him as a person for whom sexuality has never been a gratifying experience, but one marked by frustration and guilt. While true love is conspicuously absent from the protagonist's life, the recurring theme in his relationships is *utkaṁṭhā*, "longing, desire". It characterises his relationship with Jayashri, it is what irresistibly draws him towards Sundari, in the form of an intense and unfulfilled longing it still torments the old man. As objects of desire, the two women are indeed interchangeable, as clearly indicated in the dream of the opening scene: "Today it was not she in his arms, but he in her arms. It wasn't clear who she was. Perhaps she was Sundari, but she could also be Jayashri" (7).

Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh gains his first sexual experience in an illicit relationship with Jayashri, the daughter-in-law of a family of distant relatives with whom he stays while studying for his B.A. The encounter with the young woman, whose husband is studying abroad, has an enormous impact on him. It is with slightly ironic undertones that the narrator depicts the archetypal dilemma of an inexperienced young man who is torn between an idealist concept of love and the "first and most powerful eruption of sexual attraction" (27):

> From contemporary novels, especially the Hindi translations of various Bengali novels, he had learned one word: *premnivedan* — "declaration of love". Helplessly he felt that he did not merely want to make a "declaration of love", because the idealist notion of platonic love that one came across here and there in these novels, did not serve his purpose. He wanted Jayashri in his arms, wanted to ... on her lips ... (55)

Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh's timid advances culminate in the composition of a love poem to Jayashri, followed by insecurity and a feeling of guilt: "... it seemed to him that what he had done from beginning to end was stupid, and more than that, that it was rude" (56). Jayashri, however, far from rejecting his advances, in the almost casual manner of an experienced seductress takes over the initiative. She invites him to her room at night, and when he does not muster the courage to see her, herself starts paying nocturnal visits to his room. Their first night, if immensely gratifying on the physical level, remains a profoundly ambivalent experience for the protagonist: "... a rock of doubt and fear had come to lie still on his consciousness. The more unrestrained and awkward Jayashri's eagerness to arouse him became, the more embarrassed he felt" (59). From the first night, fear of discovery looms large over the two young people's relationship: their silent, furtive nocturnal encounters are grotesquely staged against the background of a nearby railway shunting yard, the noise of which conceals their togetherness and dictates the rhythm of their love-making. Thus constrained, love-making becomes a difficult, unsatisfactory and abortive affair, with Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh often unable to consummate the sexual act. Equally disturbing is the discovery of the profanity of corporal love: "He marvelled as much at himself as he marvelled at Jayashri, too. They were both very cultivated and brought up on mystical, idealist concepts of love which they had come across in poetry and tales. But the love that prospered between them was purely carnal and of a business-like sensuality" (60). The relationship comes to an abrupt end after a couple of months when the protagonist is called home after finishing his B.A. The experience leaves him in a state of enormous sexual frustration, pain and longing which is only increased by time. Only once does he meet Jayashri again before she dies under mysterious circumstances. His intention at that time to renew the relationship is described as an "attempt to transplant with quivering desire the past onto a dense, solid, rich and insipid present" (61).

The same doomed attempt to go against the grain of time by reliving the past underlies his subsequent encounter with Sundari years later. At this time the protagonist is a widower in his early fifties, more or less resolved to living a solitary life. His married life is conspicuously absent from the novel, as if it were of no consequence. On meeting Sundari, in whom he sees the mirroring image of Jayashri, his suppressed desires are suddenly and violently reanimated. The young woman promises release from all frustration: "Today, on seeing Sundari and transplanting Jayashri into her face and gestures, he had the restless feeling that things had not all come to an end yet, that the past still had a future now" (27).

What distinguishes the protagonist's second fateful encounter with a woman from the first one is the loss of innocence. The narrative leaves no doubt that from the moment

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of their first meeting Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh lusts after Sundari. The licentiousness of his desires is adroitly transformed by the narrator into a conduct of blatant social clumsiness. From his first suggestive remark to the young bhudan-voluntary—an allusion to the meaning of her name Sundari, i.e. "beautiful girl"—to an even more inappropriate nocturnal visit to the female quarters where Sundari sleeps, he seems driven by an uncontrollable physical urge that makes him forget all codes of social decency. With its many obstacles and its unsuccessful outcome this nocturnal visit borders on parody, making the protagonist look silly rather than menacing. Moreover, the terms used to describe his seemingly uncontrollable attraction—"insanity" (*junūn*), "fit" (*āveg*), "worms of licentiousness" (*lampaṭṭā ke kīṛe*)— give his desire an almost pathological quality. At one point, he enters Sundari's room and touches the sleeping beauty's breasts, to be instantly overcome by self-contempt:

> It seemed to him that if he went on letting himself lose control he would have to consult a psychologist. To touch Sundari like this could have several dangerous consequences. Disgrace, his political future ruined! And, he said to himself with alarm, "You could go to jail, Barrister Sahib!" His heart was seething with bitterness directed against himself and a sense of his own baseness. (118)

Things do get out of control when his desire to physically possess Sundari culminates in an impetuous outburst of passion which borders on physical assault. Instantly aware of his grave misdemeanour, he covers it up by a proposal of marriage. Little does he know at that point that his impromptu stratagem to save his face is to change Sundari's life forever.

Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh never manages to apologize to Sundari. In the course of time her memory fades from his mind. However, it never leaves him completely, and in fact resurfaces from time to time as a depression, an undefined longing or intense sexual fantasy (35). When the old man embarks on his first journey to Bisrampur to pay homage to the deceased, he follows a vague impulse rooted in guilt:

> ... it appeared to him that this was a sentimental journey, which, if it had made no sense during Sundari's lifetime, was now totally devoid of meaning. Be it as it may, on receiving the telegram of Sundari's death it had seemed that he had to reach the place where she had sacrificed the promising years of her youth in the name of such questionable objects as "village uplift". (20)

This impulse during his first visit to Bisrampur crystallizes into feelings of remorse. Remorse calls for atonement, turning the protagonist's self-imposed exile in Bisrampur into a redemptive encounter. With the finality of death not allowing him to reshape the past, redemption lies in emulating the life that Sundari lived. Implied in it is a quest for the renewal of his identity:

> After coming to the ashram his former improper conduct would constantly immerse him in feelings of guilt and remorse. His only satisfaction was that by coming here and adopting Sundari's lifestyle in his last days, he was in some way atoning for his former depraved conduct. Now even the

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> memory of his former desires concerning Sundari seemed a terrible violation of dharma. (154)

While Sundari, sanctified through her death, has become "forbidden territory" (*varjit kshetra*, 154) for Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh, leaving nothing but "the ashes of some desires" (*kuch utkaṁṭhāoṁ kī rākh*, 37) in him, erotic desire still persists in the form of daydreams of Jayashri. In a key scene the novel adds an important new dimension to the old man's incessant longing, suggesting that beneath the purely erotic there lies hidden a more encompassing longing for human affection and intimacy. For the old Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh, although constantly surrounded by people, is in reality a lonely man. Even his relationship with his only son is characterized by formality and lack of intimacy. It is of no mean significance that Shukla chooses the figure of an innocent child to bring about what is termed a major metamorphosis (*kāyāntaran*) in his protagonist. Dark-skinned and filthy, the five-year old Chablal is the embodiment of all that Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh secretly dislikes about the children in the ashram's hostel, who more than anything else hurt his aesthetic sensibilities. Chablal is fascinated by the old man and follows him around. While doing so the child at one point falls flat on his face. The protagonist's act of reluctanctly getting down on his knees to pick up the child is fraught with symbolic meaning: it implies not only a symbolic genuflection before the ashram's humanitarian ideals, in that he has to overcome his innate inhibitions of touching a low caste person. In a more pervasive sense it also restores him to the human touch, thereby inducing a profound transformation:

> Suddenly he experienced a new vibration—an experience which he had forgotten completely. It was like a miracle. It was the forgotten experience of the human touch provoking a healthy flow of blood in his half-dead fingers, so used to the touch of bed, chair, paper, cup, glass. With it, everything happened by itself.
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> Holding [the child] with one hand, he made a show of sweeping the dust off his chest and tummy. "*Shābāsh*, brave little boy, jumped from a horse!" But Chablal clung to his legs. Having held his breath for some seconds he now started to wail like a six-month-old baby. His face became covered with dirty blots of dust and tears. He pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped the child's eyes and nose, moved his hand over his back, made sure by touching his head and cheeks that he had not been hurt, then started to coax him, resorting spontaneously to the lisping manner of speech of children. It was an entirely forgotten idiom, which seemed completely new on his tongue, it seemed that this was his essential language, his original idiom which had emerged from his mouth after centuries, he felt its exciting sweetness on the tip of his tongue, now he was not only talking to Chablal in this idiom, but also to himself. ... It seemed to him that after centuries of loneliness he had found the human touch. Until a moment ago he had been trapped in some desolate valley, where there was no vegetation, no animals or birds, no shelter, now the nightmare was over. (145)

The above passage, making the reader believe that eventually all is going to be well with Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh, is deceitfully placed by the author just before a major catastrophe occurs in the protagonist's life. It is brought about by Sushila's visit to Bisrampur and the ensuing dramatic revelation of past events.

The protagonist exposed: an actor and his stages

At the heart of Shukla's conception of his protagonist lies a profound interest in an aspect of human nature that is concerned with self-delusion and the tendency to act out certain roles in life, implying the deliberate or involuntary deceit of others. *Abhinaya*, "acting", *khel*, "game", *nāṭak* and *nāṭakīyatā*, "drama" and "theatricality", are recurrent key words in the novel, characterizing both the protagonist's behaviour and the world of Indian politics and officialdom he belonged to for most of his life. For Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh, an apt player at the power game, acting has become second nature. He is an inveterate poseur. The constant stage-managing of his own life implies a certain amount of self-deception (*ātmachal*), of which he is not completely unaware. This very awareness, as a reviewer of the novel has argued, qualifies him as a "hypocrite" rather than a victim of self-delusion (Sharma 1998: 52). In actual fact Shukla, with a fine insight into the human mind, shows self-delusion and hypocrisy to be but two sides of the same coin, for his protagonist's behaviour testifies to both. Some of Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh's actions are depicted as well-calculated acts of hypocrisy: his seemingly "munificent" gift of two villages to Vinoba Bhave, for example, is revealed to be "a splendid score in the political game" (85). A self-interested, well-staged act it is not much of a sacrifice at all, for in fact it is barren waste land that he gives away. At other times the line between self-deception and hypocrisy is shown to be a fine one, as for example in the protagonist's surprise at his initial reaction to Sundari's death:

> Suddenly he felt that this was a show he was putting on to impress himself. Then the thought hit him that receiving the news of Sundari's death had not dealt him the kind of blow that it should have—the experience of which would have given him the satisfaction of regarding himself as a true and sensitive human being. (18)

The same intricate interplay of hypocrisy and self-deception is at work in Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh's decision to move to Bisrampur. At one level it is depicted as a politician's shrewd and self-interested act to maintain his status after having been discarded from official life: "The only thing left now was to be buried in the pit of anonymity or, in order to save his sinking reputation, to join some holy-looking movement" (87). Against this backdrop the decision is fraught with a double irony: Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh, himself driven by hypocritical motives, ends up in a place which he regards as hypocritical, for, as the narrator comments: "The Gandhian-type ashram, in principle, had always vexed him, seemed like hypocrisy to him. If, in a more liberal frame of mind he did not regard it as a sham, he certainly thought of it as an impracticable experiment" (34). Hence the enthusiasm with which he publicly defends institutions like the Bisrampur ashram comes across as fake, an example of perfect political rhetoric of which he himself is critical: "At this age such a taste for drama!" (32). Equally, he is himself

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taken by surprise by his spontaneous promise to the ashram's managing director to take charge of the institution's affairs, a promise he instantly acknowledges as a display of hypocrisy (*pākhaṁḍ*, 41), cursing himself for it.

Bisrampur is to become the ageing actor's last stage. With the alluring promise of "rest, tranquility" (*vīshrām*) contained in its name, Bisrampur, however, is a pretence in itself, for it is not a place where the protagonist can set his mind at rest. In the course of his sojourn he comes to face the hidden motivations behind his actions in all their complexity. Moreover, adapting to the reality of Bisrampur turns out to be a painful and frustrating process. Initially he feels that he "will not be able to stand the hypocrisy of service to the ashram for too many days" (88). It is at this point that the novel comes up with the second of three significant self-confrontation scenes, placed strategically at the beginning, middle and towards the end of the narrative: What gets Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh through the difficult first days in Bisrampur is the enormous public attention that his move to the ashram attracts. The newspapers and incoming letters confront him with an idealized image of himself as a untiring worker in the cause of the bhudan-movement and, even further, as an epitome of the highly valued concepts of disinterested self-sacrifice (*tyāg*) and asceticism (*sanyās*). Even though he knows this image to be false, a caricature (*vyaṁgya citra*, 90) of sorts, it restores him to public significance and so flatters his ego that he finally succumbs to this version of his present existence. The confrontation with the self, in this instance, is won by self-delusion: "His mind, which was earlier on engaged in soul-searching, was now greeting itself with ironical applause; eager to believe in the praise that the newspapers were showering on him" (90f).

Ultimately, self-delusion and hypocrisy give way to a more genuine search for self-improvement (*ātmasudhār*). However, the gradual transformation that Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh is shown to undergo remains deeply ambivalent. It is not only called into question when Sushila, a character who throughout the novel confronts the protagonist with her suspicions regarding his motives, accuses him of self-complacency (*ātmasantosh*, 165). More significantly, it is also highlighted in its very debatable nature in the following narrator's passage:

> During these last few months he had undergone certain changes that his old acquaintances could not fail to notice. A natural simplicity had come into his lifestyle, harsh words hardly crossed his tongue now, unlike before a demonstration of uncouthness neither offended his good tastes now nor did it automatically make his eyebrows rise. Anyone looking at him from the outside could see that he was acquiring a taste for a natural and simple state of being—for some kind of saintliness. Recently he had started reading the *Gītā* and also the *Yogāvashishṭha*.... He himself was aware of these changes and had secretly come to the conclusion that making a show of goodness was a good thing, too, for slowly the show comes to an end only goodness remains. (153)

However, the attainment of true sainthood is not meant for Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh. All pretence comes to an abrupt end when the past catches up with him. On the very

same day of the devastating revelation of the relationship between Vivek and Sundari the protagonist comes face to face with himself for a third and final time. This time he is confronted with the lies informing his present existence through his photograph in the newspaper, captioned "The Saint of Bisrampur" by an unsuspecting young female journalist.

The author's final irony is reserved for the protagonist's ensuing suicide, his last mise-en- scène as it were. An escape from life motivated by despair, Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh's carefully premeditated suicide is also an attempt to reinvent meaning in his existence, to transform a meaningless life (*nirarthak jīvan*) by way of a meaningful death (*sārthak mrityu*). He confronts his end in the detached manner of a "skilled murderer" (192): "There was nothing threatening nor frenzied in it, simply a feeling that he was going to play a new game, the rules of which would largely be decided on the playing-field" (193). Significantly he chooses the river Betava, a steady source of contemplation and solace during his sojourn in Bisrampur, as the medium to bring about his death. His resolution to end his life by immersing himself in the river, which throughout the novel serves as a powerful symbol of the steady flow of time and the transience of life, could be conceived as an act of reunification, a metaphorical merging with the flow of time as it were, bestowing dignity on his suicide. However, Shukla refuses his character a graceful exit from the stage of life. Instead Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh's death is turned into a grotesque spectacle which leaves no scope for either dignity or tragedy. While he betrays his own resolution of dying a "meaningful death" by trying to save himself at the very last moment, an attempt to rescue the drowning man is made by the very man who earlier on had threatened to kill him, the drunk Maharaj Dube. While coming too late, the inadvertent rescue action gets Dube into severe trouble. He is accused of murder and only escapes his predicament when Vivek informs the authorities of his father's farewell letter. The truth about the protagonist's death, thus, resurfaces for a moment, before it is finally hushed up by officials. The whole episode concludes with the narrator's sardonic comment: "In this way, as long as the matter remained alive in the people's short-lived memory, truth becoming rumour and rumour becoming truth kept gaining publicity together" (202).

At the end of the novel the reader is left to resolve a fundamental moral question, i.e. the issue of guilt that looms over the protagonist's life. Was fate, bringing about Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh's chance encounters with two women, responsible for what happened to the novel's characters? Was the meeting with Sundari, as the protagonist himself muses at one point, an "accident of life" or must he accept sole responsibility for the turn that the lives of Sundari and Vivek took? Against the backdrop of the novel's concern with self-delusion, the question becomes more complicated still: If human beings are essentially prone to self-delusion, as Shukla so emphatically tries to show in BS, how are we to judge their actions? Shukla refrains from passing judgement on his central character, whose actions remain ambivalent throughout. The author's basic scepticism extends to the narrative act itself, pointing to the writer's difficulties in translating the complexity of human nature into narrative. Vivek acts as the author's mouthpiece when he observes:

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> But the difficulty is ... that with regard to the hidden motives of our actions, our own understanding deceives us. Not everything is as clear and straightforward as we believe it to be or let others know. How difficult it must be then to correctly assess another person's reality, even if this "other" be one's own father! (81)

The "discriminating" Vivek is also the one to whom the author accords the last word. In a somewhat factitious didactical passage Vivek refuses to apply the epithet of "tragedy" to Kumvar Jayantiprasad Sinh's life, as also, for that matter, to his own and Sundari's life, reminding the reader of the "real tragedies" going on daily in India and other places in the world.

Conclusion

As one of a number of recent Hindi novels in which the character of an old person has been moved from periphery to centre stage, Shrilal Shukla's latest novel *Bisrāmpur kā sant* offers a compelling psychological portrait of an old man struggling to come to terms with his past life and present situation characterized by the all-encompassing circumstance of old age. In the portrayal of his aged protagonist the author shows a fundamental concern with the theme of self-confrontation and self-delusion behind which one may well detect an autobiographical urge. In this sense the novel may be taken to represent a profoundly self-reflective enterprise. Shukla, himself in the eighth decade of his life, offers a pessimistic view of the last stage of life. His Saint of Bisrampur never attains to the traditional Indian ideal of a wise old man for whom life's autumn brings serenity and inner harmony. Instead, an all-pervasive sense of failure informs the protagonist's life (which significantly ends in a suicide). Through the problematic and ambivalent figure of its protagonist BS raises a number of moral issues which are deliberately left open for the reader to draw his own conclusions. Most of all, however, it provides a pointed example of the "risks of retrospection in old age and the sense of futility it frequently offers" (Fallis 1989: 41).

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Notes

1. For sociological studies on ageing in India see, e.g., Chowdhry 1992; Srivastava 1994; Cohen 1998; Rajan, Mishra and Sharma 1999.
2. For Bhave and the bhudan-movement, see, e.g., Bakshi 1993; Kalindi 1994 and Osborne 1998.
3. The focalizer according to the standard definition in narratology is "the agent whose point of view orients the narrative text". He can be either external (a narrator) or internal (a character). An "internal focalizer" then is a character through whose eyes the events of the narrative are seen. He has also been called "focal character" or "reflector".
4. Illustrative of how this strategy of revelation involves the reader, is, for example, the protagonist's premonition of death on his first evening in Bisrampur: "On entering his room in the thick haze of the evening it seemed to him that he was drowning in some river, that a huge whirlpool was drawing him down into the depths like a piece of straw" (BS 82). The full significance of this passage can only be gathered at the end of the novel in the light of the protagonist´s suicide in the river.
5. The theory of "instant repulsion" as a common reaction to the decrepit body has been expounded by Simone de Beauvoir in her monumental and much discussed work on ageing and the elderly, *La vieillesse* (1970) translated into English as *The Coming of Age* (1970).
6. For a discussion of the villainous father-figure from a psychoanalytical perspective, see Kakar (1989: 34f). A different, defiant vision of sex in old age is offered by Khushvant Singh in his latest novel *The Company of Women* (1999), which the author, himself in his late eighties, has jokingly dubbed the "fantasies of an octogenarian". For a discussion of various aspects of sexuality in old age, see e.g. Hodson and Skeen 1994; for a clinical perspective see Heath 1999. Walker 1997 provides an extensive bibliography of studies dealing with the subject.